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CNN HEROES

Team Rubicon mobilizes veterans to serve their neighbors during Covid-19 pandemic

CNN US

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CNN Heroes: Team Rubicon's Covid-19 response 03:00

(CNN) — The coronavirus is posing a serious new threat to the United States -- and former service members are, once again, answering the call to protect their fellow Americans.

Many are taking action with [Team Rubicon](#), a non-profit that has helped veterans respond to more than 500 humanitarian disasters during the past decade.

The group was co-founded by Jake Wood, a former Marine who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. He had led dozens of veterans on a mission to Haiti after the massive 2010 earthquake and realized that former service members could be a valuable resource in times of crisis.

"These are men and women who have volunteered to serve in harm's way before," said Wood, a 2012 CNN Hero. "They've been deployed in some of the most austere and trying circumstances on the planet."

"They may have taken the uniform off, but they still have service in their hearts (and) they still have those incredible skills."

Team Rubicon lets veterans, who make up about 70% of its member base, put their experience to use helping others. It deploys international medical teams to assist with humanitarian crises worldwide. Domestically, volunteers often respond to natural disasters -- such as floods or tornadoes -- typically assisting with tasks like debris removal, search and rescue, hazard mitigation and volunteer management.

In response to Covid-19, Wood has asked all the volunteers on his roster -- more than 120,000 -- to join the group's



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Jake Wood's Team Rubicon helps veterans put their experience to use in times of crisis.

that keeps at-risk populations safe and contains the spread of the virus.

This campaign offers volunteers many ways to get involved. While most Team Rubicon operations are highly organized, Wood said he believes one of the most effective ways volunteers can help their communities right now is through

what he calls "individual acts of service" -- such as checking on an elderly neighbor or going grocery shopping for someone whose immune system is compromised.

While this outreach is something anyone can do on their own, [Team Rubicon's website](#) offers regularly updated safety guidance so volunteers can help without putting themselves or others at risk. The group also encourages people to self-report these acts of service on its website.

Wood's group also has a number of large-scale operations across the United States. For the past few weeks, veterans have helped stock food banks and deliver meals to those in need, often in conjunction with organizations like Feeding America and Meals on Wheels. Additionally, Team Rubicon's volunteers are helping establish and operate critical health care efforts, like a drive-thru testing site in North Carolina and a 250-bed federal medical station in Santa Clara, California.

During the pandemic alone, Team Rubicon says its volunteers have so far helped more than half a million people in more than 500 communities around the country.

Now, Wood is asking all Americans -- regardless of whether they've served in the military -- to join his effort.

"We are hoping that Neighbors Helping Neighbors can become a nationwide call to action ... to come together in this moment of need," he said. "This is about your community."

"This is a moment for all Americans to rise to the occasion by thinking about the greater good."

CNN's Kathleen Toner spoke with Wood about his work. Below is an edited version of their conversation.

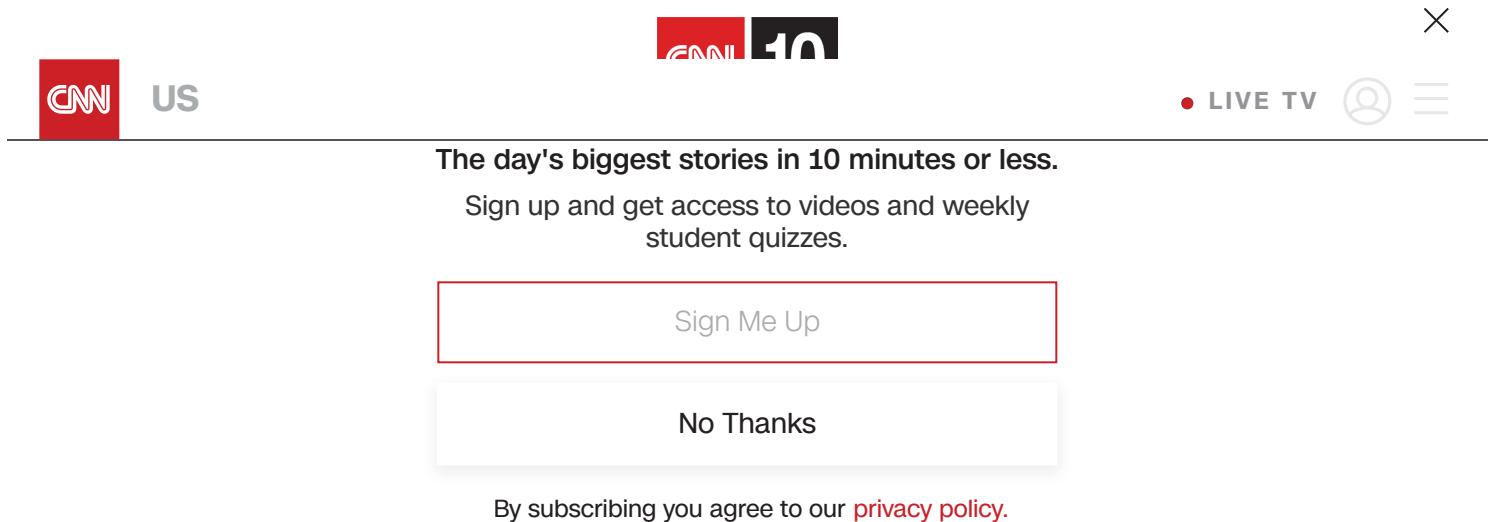
CNN: Your volunteers have been pitching in a lot with food distribution. Is that type of work usual for Team Rubicon?

Jake Wood: It's certainly outside the norm of what we do, but we quickly saw that food banks and food security in general would become really important in this pandemic. Many food banks and pantries rely on volunteers, like we do, but many of those (volunteers) tend to be in the at-risk demographic of over 65. So, those services were grinding to a halt, just as they were becoming more needed.

Our volunteers have been helping with the logistics of food sorting and getting meals to people's doorsteps. (Has that been a challenge, in light of evolving social distancing guidelines?) Yes. We've been working around the clock on a daily basis revising our guidance for our volunteers. We have different guidance for different types of activities. We want to make sure our volunteers are taking all necessary precautions.

CNN: How has Team Rubicon been helping with the medical needs that have been sparked by this virus?

Wood: We have volunteers on the front lines of all this -- whether they're running a testing site in North Carolina or a hospital center in California. We've also deployed members of our international medical team here domestically to help decompress health care systems that are overwhelmed. We are also looking to staff a federal medical station in the Navajo Nation. Our tribal nations are among the most vulnerable on the planet and it's been documented that it's spreading particularly quickly through the Navajo Nation (in Arizona). It's a large land mass, with lots of underlying comorbidities and a lack of medical infrastructure that's making it very difficult.



The image shows a mobile application interface for CNN 10. At the top, there are navigation icons for 'X', 'LIVE TV', a user profile icon, and a menu icon. The main headline reads 'The day's biggest stories in 10 minutes or less.' Below it, a sub-headline says 'Sign up and get access to videos and weekly student quizzes.' Two large buttons are present: a red-bordered 'Sign Me Up' button and a white 'No Thanks' button. At the bottom, a note states 'By subscribing you agree to our [privacy policy](#)'.

But we could be doing even more. There are hundreds of thousands of military veterans with experience in emergency medicine who aren't able to serve right now. There's a complicated state-by-state credentialing process for EMTs and paramedics, so we're calling on Congress and state governors to provide competency-based credentials to veterans with medical training. We have entire cities talking about how their hospitals look like a war zone, but we have tens of thousands of military medics who've actually been to war zones not eligible to come in to fight. It seems absurd to me.

CNN: You've been working full tilt on this effort for weeks now. How are you holding up?

Wood: It's been a lot of long days, long weeks. It's almost cliché to say it, but while this is not the first disaster we've responded to, this is different than anything we've ever done. It's taken lots of caffeine, but you get inspired every day to see people going out there doing extraordinary things. It's hard to feel sorry yourself when people are suffering and you have the ability to help them.

Want to get involved? Check out the [Team Rubicon website](#) and see how to help.

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